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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which was produced as a follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, presents examples of key areas where research is currently being conducted by various public and nongovernmental agencies and recommends ways to enhance communication among researchers. The first 75% of the booklet reviews recent research on the following topics: participation in adult education; gender issues; lifelong learning; teaching and learning processes; adult basic education in industrial countries; staff development; and learning attainment. The examples cited are drawn from Spain, India, Japan, and the United States. The trend toward diversification of theoretical frameworks, approaches, and methodologies in research on adult learning is examined. Discussed next are the following: prerequisites for international dialogue among educational researchers, barriers to the development of adult education research, and new developments in adult learning that must be reinforced in research on adult education. The following are among the six recommendations for future cooperation among adult education researchers that conclude the booklet: (1) consider the diversity of approaches and trends in adult learning research around the world; (2) avoid imposing research formulae; and (3) seek new ways to promote debate on adult education among researchers, practitioners, and institutions. (MN)

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A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

2b Multiplicity of research

The multiplicity of research on 'Learning for All', a key for the 21st century

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This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

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Theme 2: Improving conditions and quality of adult learning
Booklets under this theme:

2a Universities and the future of adult learning
2b The multiplicity of research on 'Learning for All', a key for the 21st century
2c Global community of adult learning through information and documentation: developing a network of networks
2d Monitoring adult learning for knowledge-based policy-making
2e The politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society

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Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

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The multiplicity of research on "Learning for All", a key for the 21st century

Introduction

There is a great richness in research on adult learning worldwide. It deals with different countries, peoples, cultural origins, methodologies and approaches. The workshop "The multiplicity of research on 'Learning for All', a key for the 21st century" at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in July 1997 in Hamburg, proposed ways of developing international co-operation and suggested ways to preserve the diversity of research from all cultures of the world. The workshop chaired by Ramón Flecha from the Research Centre for Adult education (CREA), University of Barcelona, featured the following panel of speakers: Hashim Abuzeid El Safi, Institute of Adult Education, Sudan; John Cummings, Harvard University, USA; Anita Dighe, National Institute of Adult Education, New Delhi; Yukiko Sawano, National Institute for Educational Research, Japan.

The booklet presents some examples of key areas in which research is currently being conducted by various public and non-governmental agencies. It concludes with proposals for follow-up and recommendations on ways to enhance communication between researchers.

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Research on participation in adult education

Research on participation in different forms of organised adult learning is being conducted in an increasing number of countries using different and often complementary methodologies: quantitative analysis of survey data, qualitative inquiry and biographical research. Attitudinal studies are also being undertaken to describe patterns of learning and barriers to participation in organised adult education.

It is a question not just of determining who is participating or not, but of interpreting the cultural and social embeddedness of adult learning.

Quantitative surveys are essential to assess the situation and to reveal uneven participation (see booklet 2 d on the monitoring of adult learning where the international project of OECD, Statistics-Canada and UIE/UNESCO is described).

Qualitative approaches should help in understanding the structural and contextual factors affecting participation and non-participation. In order to have a complete picture of adult learning it is necessary to combine qualitative methodologies, which assess communicative situations, with interpretations of cultures, communities and individuals who suffer social and cultural exclusion. Qualitative methodology is particularly useful in researching the factors that motivate adults to learn.

The tendency in the past was to interpret the marginalised individual in terms of deficit. However, research has moved towards considering these persons as active players in their own lives. Participation and non-participation need to be understood in relation to other social and cultural practices and the individual's own interpretations of their daily lives.

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The Research Centre for Adult Education (CREA) in Barcelona

CREA is conducting a research programme on participation in adult education using quantitative and qualitative methodologies such as surveys, life stories, case studies and comparisons. Research has shown that though there appears to be a big increase in demand for adult education, participation in organised learning is unevenly distributed between persons of differing educational and social status.

Efforts are being made to analyse the real causes of non-participation by interpreting the voices of individuals. Biographical accounts highlight the fact that adult attendance in literacy classes is associated with low status relative to the positive experience from attending, say, a Master's course. Reasons for non-participation include lack of time, inadequacy of timetables and insufficient access to course-related information.

Research in gender issues

A growing trend in research is to look at the gender dimension of adult learning: the hidden curriculum, the different learning patterns of women and men, the barriers to women's participation in adult learning, the development of gender-sensitive monitoring systems and the documentation of the best local practices on women's empowerment.

Research on gender at the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE), New Delhi

Research projects at NIAE have focused on literacy. Emphasis is placed on the social context of literacy practices and literacy data is differentiated by sex. The questions raised are: Why do women come to literacy classes? Why do they stay? For what reasons do they drop out? To what uses do they put their literacy ? How do they retain literacy?

The practice of large scale social mobilisation in literacy campaigns has important implications for women's literacy as it socially sanctions the participation of women in literacy programmes in Indian society.

Researches show that literacy classes provide women learners and volunteers with an opportunity to meet and break their social isolation. Research in South Delhi shows that women have specific personal and social reasons for participating in the literacy campaign. Literacy classes offer women learners opportunities to meet in small groups and share experiences about work, family and health.

Other researches deal with factors that facilitate women's participation in literacy classes, taking into account the constraints that poor women face in terms of time, space and social obligations.

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Lifelong learning

The concept of "lifelong education" is gaining ground, but its impact on educational systems is still unclear. We are only beginning to document the evolving relationships between initial education, adult learning and the learning environment. If there is a general trend towards lifelong education, there is also a diversity in the contexts, in the projects, in the political economy of initial and adult education, as well as in the variety of learning environments. In short, there is a plurality of lifelong educations. The challenge for researchers is to understand the empirical and transitional processes of diverse national education systems in order to see how current developments can be assessed and influenced.

Lifelong Learning Research at NIER in Japan

The Japanese Government has decided to make lifelong learning for all a major priority for reform in education. The National Institute for Educational Research has been playing a crucial research role in the field of adult education. Three approaches can be identified:

1 Gathering data on lifelong learning policies and attitudes in the different regions, mainly by compiling bibliographies.

2 Undertaking comparative studies on adult education and lifelong learning according to common sets of indicators.

3 Studying the real learning contexts and daily learning practices in a manner akin to biographical research.

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Research on teaching/learning processes

One current procedure of research on teaching/learning processes is to group adults according to educationally meaningful categories, and to explore ways in which concepts borrowed from the study of primary and secondary education can be extended into the field of adult learning, or substantially revised in order to be relevant to understanding the way adults learn. Other procedures address directly the specific learning practices of adults in different cultures.

Efforts are being made to document the everyday uses of literacy and other skills and the ways in which people recognise and share their different abilities. Such a study aims not only, for example, to help people learn to read and write better, but also to bring about changes in the culture of reading and to place adult learning in the real contexts of everyday life.

Studies are also being conducted in health and environment education to assess different non-formal teaching and communication methods.

Other research projects look at the best practices in the use of new information technologies for basic education, and for teaching/learning a second language.

Research on adult basic education in industrialised countries

Drawing on the categories used in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), most research programmes on adult basic education focus on the bottom two categories of the five step scale of basic skills. These represent the population with literacy and numeracy skills estimated insufficient to cope with the basic requirements of industrialised societies. In the US, for example, these two categories make up about 45 per cent of the population and amount to a total of 90 million people.

With communication becoming more and more complex, the required basic skills and the ability to solve daily problems at work and in social or private life are being continuously upgraded. Because of this, unskilled workers have difficulties keeping their jobs or finding new work when unemployed. Initial education of children and the school system cannot alone cope with this changing demand. Adult literacy has therefore become a priority.

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In industrialised countries, research and development on adult literacy is being funded and conducted in differing ways through various agencies. Nevertheless research agencies have been trying to develop comprehensive national strategies and to advocate national research agendas. Literacy practitioners, trainers of adult educators, administrators and policy-makers are increasingly consulted to build such agendas.

The National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at Harvard University, for example, has adopted an agenda centered on the study of adult basic skills in the US and on research aimed at improving practice in ongoing programmes. Research includes studies on learners' motivation and prior learning experience, analysis of the teaching/learning process, evaluation and monitoring of programmes and development of projects for both training and upgrading of trainers.

Despite a high demand for learning basic skills and a growing awareness among the population concerned, there is a high drop-out rate in many adult basic education programmes. This problem has been monitored quantitatively and studied through qualitative approaches in order to find out the conditions affecting learners' motivation, which either cause them to drop out or help them to persist.

Research on staff development

Staff development and in-service training of adult educators are mostly done in a classroom context with formal programmes leading to formal certification. However, new non-formal and informal contexts as well as the use of distance education are gaining in importance. Research in this field aims to measure the impact of the different kinds of approach within various learning contexts.

Attempts are being made to institute a system of participatory research, where teachers do their own research as an effective way to reflect on and improve their own practices. The multiple intelligence theory, for example, is being used in a teacher/researcher project to give teachers a tool with which to understand the experiences and expertise that adults bring into the learning processes and then to build on that understanding.

The issue of professionalisation of adult education is contentious. On the one hand, most adult educators have no specific pre-service training and are afraid of losing their jobs; on the other hand, the professional

status of adult educators is often only marginally recognised. In the USA an in-service approach was introduced with the aim of gradually moving towards a system of on-the-job accreditation of adult educators.

Research on learning attainment

Evaluative techniques with an emphasis on quantitative data tend to dominate research in adult education. The studies commissioned by governments tend to concentrate primarily on monitoring the implementation of programmes, focusing on such factors as percentage of people made literate, drop-out rate, proportion of women participants, measures of attainment.

Ways are being looked at for broadening the measures beyond pure academic standards, to embrace criteria more relevant to adults at work, in the community and at home.

Besides assessing adult learners' achievements, another important measure is the economic advantages that an adult may gain from better qualifications, both in the formal and informal economies. Such research is often directed towards informing practice in adult education and justifying funding from donor agencies.

More research and qualitative data are required on the acquisition, retention and uses of newly acquired competencies, taking into account the meaning adults attach to learning in their everyday lives.

Especially in the context of structural adjustment programmes and the shrinking number of jobs, research is also needed on the mastering of vocational skills for sustainable economic activities, both in the formal and the informal economies.

More transnational studies will help us understand how cultural and socio-economic factors impinge on learning experiences.

Despite increased participation of women in literacy, there is very little critical research on levels of literacy attainment and on the rate of relapse into illiteracy, when compared with research on literacy achievements among men. Statistics indicating the increased participation of women may conceal low levels of literacy compared to men.

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Diversity of approaches and methodologies

Diversification is a prevailing trend in research on adult learning: diversification of theoretical frameworks, of approaches and of methodologies. But artificial boundaries are often created through isolation of disciplines and lack of communication mechanisms or inter-disciplinary documentation networks. Nevertheless, the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methodologies is giving way to recognition of the complementarity between such approaches.

Research has to embrace different processes, modalities and methodologies. Dialogue between researchers should be promoted because it encourages researchers to collaborate in the development of adult learning.

There is an urgent need to rebuild national adult learning systems, in all their diversity, along multi-disciplinary lines.

Communicative research and international dialogue

The aim of transnational education research is to highlight not only commonalities but also diversities: in objectives, target groups, methodologies, approaches, learning environments and traditions.

It relies upon international networks to communicate the diverse methodologies, approaches, orientations and contexts needed as material.

Arbitrary divisions, such as quantitative versus qualitative methodologies, specialised versus participatory research and so on, make little sense. There is need to nurture diversity, while resisting a relativistic vision of diversity that might obscure the universal standard of human rights.

There are a number of prerequisites for such international dialogue:

- improved access to research reports and publications;
- translation and dissemination of research excerpts;
- multi-disciplinary and inter-regional meetings;
- support for publishing the work of young researchers.

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Barriers to the development of adult education research

There are major obstacles to research in the field of adult education and to co-operation between research teams: the diverse and shifting definitions of adult learning, as well as the coexistence of unrelated provisions and policies, often developed under different names, ministries and frames of reference.

A related obstacle is the paucity of communication between research networks dealing with adult learning and, as mentioned above, between the relevant academic disciplines.

There are many other barriers to the development of adult education research. A commonly cited characteristic of adult education research is its marginalisation in relation to other fields of research. There is very little interaction between communities of researchers in the fields of education and social sciences, and the influence of adult education research is almost non-existent outside its borders.

Adult learning tends also to be marginalised in the power-knowledge equation. Adult education research is seldom given high priority. There is a tendency to apply mechanically to adult learning the findings developed in other fields of education and the social sciences without taking into account the different context in which these theories were originally generated.

Conclusions and recommendations for follow-up

New developments in adult learning need to be reinforced:

- reconstructing and co-ordinating the fragmented adult learning efforts at the national level;
- networking research in order to learn from the way problems are solved in other contexts and situations;
- shifting the vision of literacy from an instrumental to a relational and developmental perspective;
- modifying research techniques to recognise the contribution of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, both separately and in different combinations;
- communicative approaches to avoid ethno-centricism;
- studying interrelationships between race, gender and classes;
- improving the quality of research and its applicability for policy development and the practice of adult learning.

The workshop made the following recommendations for future cooperation between researchers in the diversified domain of adult learning:

- to take into account the diversity of approaches and trends in adult learning research around the world;
- to avoid the imposition of research formulae;
- to make available information on research conducted in all countries in order to learn from the way problems are defined and solved in the different contexts and situations;
- to invite UIE/UNESCO to organise a seminar with representatives of existing regional networks;
- for international organisations to support international research on adult learning and to encourage multicultural research teams;
- to seek new ways to promote a debate on adult education between researchers, practitioners and institutions.

The workshop proposed, as a follow-up initiative, that an international network, bringing together existing regional and national research networks, be established using both conventional approaches and new technologies (e.g. a web site to report on research conducted in different institutions or agencies of research).

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 2

Improving conditions and quality of adult learning

Booklets under this theme:

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